

Land of the Sacred, Land of the Damned:
Conceptualizing homeland among the upholders of
the *Thariqah 'Alawiyyah* in Indonesia

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‘The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambiance of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things beside the “truth”, which is itself a representation.’

-Edward W. Said²

The construction of identity among Hadrami migrants in Indonesia has been the subject of extensive historical inquiry. At the centre of these inquiries lies the question of the relationship between the Hadramis in the *mahjar* (hostland) in this case Indonesia and their homeland, Hadramaut. It is from this transnational connection and

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² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p. 272.



relationship that different variants of identity were constructed.³ These investigations, however, focus particularly on political and cultural notions of identity as a result of over reliance by historians on secular sources. Little attention has been paid to the construction of spiritual identity among the Hadramis despite the strong presence of an almost exclusively Hadrami mystical association in both places. Religious literature, such as hagiographies and ‘spiritual’ travelogues have, to a certain extent, been neglected in established academic discourses.

This paper examines a group of Hadramis who were widely regarded as scholars, mystics and savants. They were members of a *sufi* (mystical) order, the *Thariqah ‘Alawiyyah*, which was almost an exclusively Hadrami order.⁴ Discussions about the construction of identity for this group have not developed because their voices were absent from ‘reliable’ sources. What I mean by reliable sources are those references widely accepted as historical sources such as colonial records, European travel writing and other secular literature. By focusing on such sources, historians have failed to consider the construction of identity among the mystically inclined group.

The fundamental assertion of this paper is that the adherents of the *Thariqah* have contributed to the debate on identity in Indonesia. They have actively constructed an identity, which was spiritual in nature. The solidification of identity within this mystical association was not maintained through print-capitalism, but through spiritual texts, which were read by the adherents of the order both individually and collectively. Accordingly, the best historical sources that can illustrate this phenomenon are the spiritual texts themselves.

The paper suggests the importance of spiritual texts in opening new avenues in examining the general history of the Hadrami Diaspora. The essential problem with

³ For the debate on Hadrami identity see Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publication, Cornell University, 1999).

⁴ Syed Naquib al-Attas, *Some Aspect of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963) p. 36.



this endeavor is the resistance of the text to meaningful secular interpretations. Spiritual literatures must be read 'against the grain'. The paper offers a specific reading process as a possible strategy to overcome the intricacies of such texts. It focuses on a *rihlah* (travelogue), written in 1952, which if read in this way, can serve as an important historical source regarding the construction of identity.⁵

Methodology

In approaching the question of the conceptualization of homeland among the adherents of the *Thariqah Alawiyyah*, I use the tools of textual and inter-textual analysis. That is, a close reading of a number of texts to enable me to focus on the perceptions of homeland among the adherents of the *Thariqah* themselves. In this instance, I am reading the *rihlah* against other texts written in the tradition of the *Thariqah*, in order to highlight the presence of dialogues and conversations between each text. The basic assumption of this paper is the existence of what I call *the sphere of the thariqah*. That is an imaginary sphere limited to the circle of the adherents of the order, where a number of texts were released so that each literate member of the order could access them. The sphere of the *thariqah* was kept intact by the transnational network of the scholars of the *thariqah*.⁶ As Ali bin Husein Al-Attas had shown in his hagiographical work, *Taj al-A'ras*, the network of the *Thariqah* in the 19th and the 20th century was solid and extended from Hadramaut to a number of Hadrami *mahjar* such as India and Indonesia.⁷ Al-Attas also noted the reception of works written in Hadramaut in places like Indonesia and vice versa. This indicates the existence of a sphere, limited to the adherents of the *thariqah*, where texts written in the tradition of the order, were exposed and accessed.

⁵ Abdulkadir bin Husein Assegaf, *Layali al-qadri fi al-akhdzi 'an al-Habib Abubakar*, translated from Arabic to Indonesian by Novel Muhammad Alaydrus (Solo: Putera Riyadi, 2001).

⁶ For the network of scholars of the *Thariqah* see: Ali bin Husein al-Attas, *Taj al-A'ras fi Manaqib al-Habib al-Qutbh Salih bin 'Abdullah al-Attas* (Kudus: Menara Kudus, 1979).

⁷ *ibid.*



What this paper is seeking to do, therefore, is to read a number of texts within the sphere of the *Thariqah*. The focus, however, remains on the perception of homeland. What this paper seeks to highlight is how the adherents of the *Thariqah* perceived the notion of homeland and what constituted to the construction of homeland. Particular attention is paid to the presence of innovation in language and style. With the exception of a few works, the presence of innovation in language has received little attention in the study of Asian societies.⁸ Bringing the *rihlah* into dialogue with other texts is one way of assisting the analysis of the changing perceptions within the order. In a way, this paper is exposing a sense of movement and dynamic in perceptions and ideas within the adherents of the *Thariqah*.

What I am proposing in the paper is a particular reading formation that can be employed when dealing with such texts. The basic assumption of this approach is that, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, meanings are created within the context of actions and practices that are not always obvious.⁹ In order to appreciate a particular meaning of language, one has to understand the background of the language itself. This can be done by observing the actions and practices that have constructed the meaning of the language. In other words, the meaning of language is not absolute but highly relative, depending on the actions and practices. The meaning of language, therefore, can only become clear if we contextualize it within a particular background. By doing so, the significance of the language, will come to life. The notion of ‘homeland’ was part of an integral Hadrami narrative, that of migration. The narrative of migration, therefore, became the background of my reading of the *rihlah*. In putting the *rihlah* into a particular background, I have used a distinctive dialectic. First, to comprehend the background of the text that enables us to grasp its meaning. Secondly, to observe how

⁸ See for instance: Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); H.M.J. Maier, *In the Center of Authority: The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988); Jane Drakard, *A Malay Frontier: Unity and Duality in a Sumatran Kingdom* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1990).

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958) Pp. 174, 226.



the text relates to the background. Thirdly, to re-read the text and in the light of its historical context.

In order to understand the text, one has to trace the background that projectively shaped the text. The *rihlah* was written and shaped by the author who was influenced by his own understandings. In order to know what the text is all about, therefore, one has to pay special attention to these understandings. The author was born and raised within the tradition of the *Thariqah*. It is safe to say that the books, poems and other form of literature he was exposed to, came from this particular tradition. In addition, the *rihlah* was written for an exclusive audience, in this case, the adherents of the *Thariqah*. It is important, therefore, to be familiar with these understandings by studying some important tenets of the *Thariqah* and its connection to the notions of migration and homeland. For this reason, an examination on the earlier texts written within the sphere of the *Thariqah*, which conceives both notions, became a necessity. By doing so, I can appreciate the author and his text understandings of the text in relation to the perception of homeland within the *Thariqah*.

Secondly, after noticing the background, I read the *rihlah* against the background. By doing this, we can notice how the *rihlah* communicated with the earlier perceptions. By configuring the text within the narrative of migration, I was also able to comprehend some metaphors and innovations in language within the text. By configuring the understandings and the text, I could thus expose how the *rihlah* communicated to its background, which in this case were other texts of the *Thariqah* regarding the theme of migration and the perception of homeland.

Thirdly, after placing the *rihlah* into a particular narrative, I appropriate the theme of the *rihlah* into the immediate socio-political-economic context to see how the *rihlah* was affected by its context. Seen in this way, the approach does not limit itself solely to textual studies and the changing perceptions within the texts, but also acknowledges the processes of power and economics, which shaped the perceptions of homeland among the adherents of the *Thariqah* both in colonial and post-colonial Indonesian



society. In other words, by refiguring the *rihlah* into its projected context, one can see that the *rihlah* was connected to its historical surroundings. This means that the meanings of the text can be found not only in the text itself but outside as well. As David Birch, in the context of Singapore once noted, textual and inter-textual analysis ‘requires reading beyond, around and outside the text. It requires a critical literacy which assumes from the very start that not everything that a text means can be “found” in what a text says.’¹⁰ The *rihlah*, therefore, was a medium used by the adherents of the *Thariqah* to express their views and perceptions on identity, migration and homeland in the light of its immediate socio-political contexts.

The Rihlah

Writing a *rihlah* or travelogue has been a long established tradition among Muslims. The *sufis* especially used travelogue to record encounters with various spiritual masters and scholars who lived in different places. In this way, *rihlahs* were utilized to record the transmission of knowledge and benediction. In addition, *sufi rihlahs* were employed to construct ‘spiritual maps’, which were used by people of later generation as guides to direct pilgrimages. *Rihlah*, therefore, was a literary tool utilized to form an ‘imagined’ physical boundary of a religious community.¹¹

The paper focuses on a *rihlah* entitled *Layali al-qadri fi al-akhdzi ‘an al-Habib Abubakar*. It contains a narrative of the journey of Alawi bin Ali al-Habsyi, a prominent scholar and mystic who lived in Solo, Central Java. The text was written by his disciple, Abdulkadir bin Husein Assegaf. In August 1953, Alawi undertook a journey to the coastal town of Gresik in order to fulfill the invitation of the *Qutbh* (spiritual pole of a sufi order), Abubakar bin Muhammad Assegaf. The *Qutbh* desired

¹⁰ David Birch, “Reading State Communication as Public Culture” in Phyllis G.L. Chew & Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (Eds.), *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999) p. 27.

¹¹ D.F. Eickelman & James Piscatori, “Social Theory in the Study of Muslim Societies” in D.F. Eickelman & James Piscatori (Eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 4.



to transfer his spiritual authority and position to Alawi. For this reason, Alawi traveled to Gresik in the hope of receiving the *barakah* (benediction) and *sirr* (inmost secret) of the *Qutbh*. Alawi, however, did not only visit Gresik but traveled around East Java and visited a number of saints and scholars who lived in various parts of the province. The traveling party was also invited to various religious and intellectual forums hosted by numerous scholars in the region. In addition, Alawi made *ziyara* (pilgrimages) to numerous shrines of deceased saints scattered around the area. Throughout the trip, Abdulkadir was instructed by his teacher to record the journey.

The format of the *rihlah* follows the conventional method of spiritual literature. The text was written in Arabic and largely in prose, with some poetry and chants formulas. Many references were made to canonical books and popular saints of the *Thariqah*. The scribe not only depicted various personalities Alawi met, but also their illustrious lineages and educational backgrounds, by mentioning the saint's teachers. On a literary level, Abdulkadir followed in a long tradition of panegyric writing, repeatedly stressing the nobility of the scholars and saints of the order. The underlying message is that of authority. The saints and scholars of the order were presented as ultimate founts of knowledge and wisdom. What we can deduce from these observations is that the *rihlah*'s intended audience was very exclusive. The reader had to know Arabic, established opus of the order and names and biographies of popular saints. In addition, he or she had to know the Javanese cities mentioned in the text, because the author did not introduce these places. The *rihlah*, therefore, was written for the Hadrami adherents of the *Thariqah*, who were familiar with both the tenets and tradition of the order and Java.

The text itself provides a very detailed itinerary of the journey, including the names of all the scholars whom Alawi met and talked with as well as the graves to which he paid the *ziyara*. The table below shows the itinerary of Alawi's travel party:

9 August 1952/18 Dzulqaidah 1371	→Departure from Solo (Surakarta)
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Visiting Syeikh ‘Awudh Ba’abduh in Madium → Visiting the saint, Habib Husein bin Muhammad al-Haddad in Jombang and engaging in intellectual forum with him. → Departure from Jombang and arrival in Gresik. → Meeting with the <i>Qutbh</i>, Habib Abubakar bin Muhammad Assegaf. → Holding spiritual forum with the <i>Qutbh</i> and the people of Gresik.
10 August 1952/19 Dzulqaidah 1371	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Holds intellectual forum with the people of Gresik and Surabaya in his place of residence. → Visiting a number of houses in Gresik. → Holding another spiritual forum with the <i>Qutbh</i> and people from Gresik and Surabaya. → The <i>Qutbh</i> initiates ‘Alawi to the elevated spiritual station.
11 August 1952/20 Dzulqaidah 1371	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Visiting a number of prominent Hadramis in Gresik. → Paying respect to the tomb of an unknown local saint. → Visiting a school, headed by Hasyim bin Syeikhon and gives lecture there. → Paying a farewell visit to the <i>Qutbh</i>. → Departure for Surabaya → <i>Ziyara</i> (pilgrimage) to the tomb of two Hadrami saints: Muhammad bin Idrus al-Habsyi & Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Muhdor, accompanied by the people of Surabaya. → Lunch at the house of Abdulkadir bin Hadi Assegaf. → Afternoon call to the house of Ahmad bin Ghalib (the principal of al-Kairiyyah school). → Attending public forum in the house of Muhsin bin Alawi Assegaf.
12 August 1952/ 21 Dzulqaidah 1371	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Visiting a number of prominent Hadramis in Surabaya. → Departure for Pasuruan. → In the afternoon, Arrive in the house of the saint, Ja’far bin Syeikhon Assegaf. → Holding a spiritual and intellectual



	<p>forum with the saint and the people of Pasuruan.</p> <p>→ Visiting a number of prominent Hadramis in Pasuruan.</p>
13 August 1952/ 22 Dzulqaidah 1371	<p>→ Breakfast at the house of the saint and engage in morning forum.</p> <p>→ Departure for Probolinggo and visit a number of scholars who live there.</p> <p>→ Departure for Bangil and visit the saintly Husein bin Abubakar Assegaf.</p> <p>→ Hold a prayer at the house of the deceased saint, Abdullah bin Ali al-Haddad.</p> <p>→ Return to Surabaya and visit more people.</p> <p>→ Attend the public spiritual forum at the house of Hud bin Abdullah Assegaf in Surabaya.</p>
14 August 1952/ 23 Dzulqaidah 1371	<p>→ Visiting prominent Hadramis in Surabaya.</p> <p>→ Attending forum at the house of Syeikh Muhammad Basbait.</p> <p>→ Attending the recitation of <i>Maulid</i> (Story of the Prophetic Birthday) at the house of Husein bin Ahmad al-Haddad.</p>
15 August 1952/ 24 Dzulqaidah 1371	<p>→ <i>Ziyara</i> to the tomb of Habib Syeikh bin Ahmad Bafaqih and other saints who are buried near his shrine.</p> <p>→ Holding prayer at the house of the deceased saint, Abubakar bin Umar bin Yahya.</p> <p>→ Another visit to the <i>Qutbh</i> in Gresik.</p>
16 August 1952/ 25 Dzulqaidah 1371	<p>→ Visiting religious scholars in Surabaya.</p> <p>→ Depart for Sidoarjo and visit a number of Hadramis there.</p> <p>→ Depart for Lawang.</p> <p>→ An Outing to the mountain villa of Ali bin Muhamad al-Hasbyi.</p>
17 August 1952/ 26 Dzulqaidah 1371	<p>→ Paying a visit to the <i>pondok</i> (religious academy) of Husein bin Ali Ba'bud.</p> <p>→ Visiting the villa of the poet Abdulkadir bin Abdurahman Assegaf.</p> <p>→ Departure from Lawang to Malang.</p> <p>→ Visit the Hadramis in Malang.</p> <p>→ Paying a visit to the celebrated jurist,</p>



	Abdulkadir bin Ahmad Bilfaqih and hold a forum with him. → Paying a call to the jurist Hamid Assiriy.
18 August 1952/ 27 Dzulqaidah 1371	→ Departure for Jombang. → Revisit the saint, Habib Husein bin Muhammad Al-Haddad. → Paying a visit to Muhsin bin Hasan Assegaf, who cries: 'flood has descend upon barren land'. → In the afternoon, return to Solo.

There are five important points that can be learnt from the *rihlah* if read in isolation. First is the transmission of exoteric scriptural learning, which is a general pattern of the scholarly world of Islam. An example for this would be the sermon given by Alawi to the schoolchildren in the town of Gresik, in which he elucidated the importance of the pursuit of knowledge.¹² The second point is the transmission of esoteric learning, which is exclusive to Sufism. Alawi was initiated by the *Qutbh* and received blessings from him. He also gave away *ijaza* (license to read a chant or book) to people during his journey. These events were recorded in the *rihlah* as a sign of esoteric transmission. The third is the blessings obtained from living or dead saints. Blessings were not passed on in the sense that they were confirmed by written words. Rather, the whole travelogue implies that Alawi's contact with other saints and scholars brought blessings. Supernatural events were described by the *rihlah* as visions whether in dreams or through apparition. When Alawi, for example, visited the celebrated jurist Abdulkadir Bilfaqih, the former saw the spirit of his saintly father sitting beside the jurist.¹³ This mystical experience was later told by Alawi to the scribe who recorded it. The fourth point is the teachings of the *Thariqah* itself. In the forums held throughout the journey, Alawi and other scholars illustrated the fundamental elements of the order and its teachings. They also related the tenets of the order with the scriptural doctrines. The text, therefore, can be used as an important material in studying not only the doctrine but also the practices of the *Thariqah*. The last point is the hagiographic

¹² Abdulkadir Assegaf, *Layali al-qadri*, pp.48-9.

¹³ *ibid*, pp. 103-4



account of past saints and scholars. The author of the *rihlah* spent considerable space in the text to narrate the miraculous and mystical stories of a number of deceased saints.

It is clear that the text does not explicitly inform us about the notion of identity and the relationship between the *mahjar* and the homeland. It communicates more about the spiritual teachings and activities of the members of the *Thariqah*. This is because we have not adopted the necessary reading formation that serves to highlight the issues of identity and migration. What is important to appreciate at this stage is that the text resists meaningful historical interpretation in regards to the conceptualization of homeland. We will now discuss the ideas and perceptions on identity and homeland within the *Thariqah* by examining a number of texts written by the leading personalities of the order. Then, we will examine the narrative of migration so that we can re-read the *rihlah* in light of these themes so as to expose the dialogue and communication that the *rihlah* established with earlier texts.

Thariqah Alawiyyah

Thariqah Alawiyyah was founded in Hadramaut during the 13th century by *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam*.¹⁴ It was disseminated throughout the valley by a group of scholars who settled in different urban-centers to propagate the teachings of Islam as subscribed by the order. The scholars became the spiritual leaders and mentors for the masses. The principles of the *Thariqah* focus on following the *Qur'an*, the Prophetic traditions and the teachings of the pious predecessors, while maintaining *zuhd* (ascetic and anti-materialistic lifestyle).¹⁵

The notion of *zuhd* was very pivotal to the conceptualization of homeland. One of the leading classical Arab lexicographer, Ali bin Muhammad al-Jurjani defined *zuhd* as

¹⁴ Syed Hasan bin Muhammad al-Attas, *Umar bin Abdurahman: Kisah dan Sejarah Pengasas Ratib al-Attas*, Vol. I (Singapore: Masjid Ba'alawi, 2001) p. 66.

¹⁵ Alawi bin Tahir al-Haddad, *Uqud al-Almas* (Singapore: Kerjaya Mahdudah, 1991) p. 54.



‘the hatred of the world and turning away from it’ (bughdz ad-dunya wa al-I’radz ‘anha) and ‘the act of quitting the comfort of the world in order to acquire the comfort of the Hereafter’ (taraka rahati ad-dunya toliban lirahati al-akhirah).¹⁶ One of the luminary of the *Thariqah ‘Alawiyyah*, Abdullah bin Alawi al-Haddad claimed in his poem that the world is the abode of diseases, problems and distress.¹⁷ Elaborating further on *zuhd*, the pupil of al-Haddad, Ahmad bin Zayn al-Habsyi divided *zuhd* into three levels. First is the turning away from the universe, followed by turning away from oneself and finally turning away from anything except for God.¹⁸ The notion of *zuhd* has been a fundamental concept in the tenets of the *Thariqah* and as we will see, it played an important role in the conceptualization of homeland among its adherents.

Another important factor within the *Thariqah* that contributed to the conceptualization of homeland was the presence of a cult of saints. Livelihood in Hadramaut was difficult. Most of the populations were preoccupied with fulfilling necessities. The position of scholars became vital in the community as they acted to spiritually nourish the people. Their piety and erudite thoughts became an exemplar for others. To respect and love a scholar was a form of one’s devotion to God. Linda Boxberger stated that “the ritual life of the community focused around a spiritual leader and often around the memory of a previous spiritual leader”.¹⁹ The scholars became a medium for intercessions, thereby establishing a cult of saints in Hadramaut.²⁰ Over the valley, one can see domed shrines of saints and scholars, which were kept alive by *ziyara* of people asking for intercession.

¹⁶ Ali bin Muhammad al-Jurjani, *Kitab at-Ta’rifat* (Cairo: Dar al-Irshad, 1991) p. 130.

¹⁷ Abdullah bin ‘Alawi al-Haddad, *Ad-Durr al-Manzum li Dzawiy al-‘Uqul wa al-Fuhum* (Beirut: Dar al-Hawi, A.H. 1312) p. 453.

¹⁸ Ahmad bin Zayn al-Habsyi, *Syarh al-‘Ayniyyah* (Singapore: Kerjaya al-Mahmudah, 1987) p. 289.

¹⁹ Linda Boxberger, *On the Edge of Empire: Hadramawt, Emigration and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002) p. 153.

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 153.



Identity among the followers of the *Thariqah* was primordial in nature, that is, identity flows from shared cultural or symbolic values.²¹ Syed Farid Alatas argued that the identity of the Hadramis in general was neither ethnic nor national, but was based on kinship.²² For the followers of the *Thariqah* however, another level of identity was formed by their affiliation to the order itself. This identity was spiritual in nature. Yet the spiritual identity had a corresponding reality in the physical world in the form of the shrines scattered throughout Hadramaut. Pilgrimages to these shrines and hagiographic literature praising the saints, together with the ability to practice *zuhd* elevated the sacredness of the landscape, thereby affirming the position of Hadramaut as the spiritual homeland of the *Thariqah*.²³ Identity among followers of the *Thariqah* was spiritual but at the same time conveyed the idea of a physical 'spiritual homeland'. As we will see, both *zuhd* and the cult of saints played an important role in the conceptualization of homeland among the adherents of the *Thariqah* 'Alawiyyah.

The Migration

During the 19th century, emigration from Hadramaut to Southeast Asia reached its peak. The growth of capitalism in the Dutch East Indies attracted Hadramis. The rapid economic development in Southeast Asia came as a result of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.²⁴ Hadramis from different social backgrounds, including the adherents of the *Thariqah*, took part in this mercantile project. Despite the geographical distance between Indonesia and Hadramaut, the connection between both places remained

²¹ D.F. Eickelman & James Piscatori, "Social Theory in the Study of Muslim Societies", p.17

²² Syed Farid Alatas, "Hadramaut and The Hadrami Diaspora: Problems in Theoretical History" in Ulrike Freitag & William G. Clarence-Smith (Eds), *Hadrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s* (New York: Brill, 1997) p.29.

²³ For some theoretical observations on the role of pilgrimages in the construction of sacred landscape, see Alexander Knysh, "The Tariqa on a Landcruiser: The Resurgence of Sufism in Yemen", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, i. 3 (2001) pp. 299-414.

²⁴ Engseng Ho, 'Hadramis Abroad in Hadramaut: The Muwalladin', in Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence-Smith (Eds), *Hadrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean*, p. 139.



strong especially among the adherents of the *Thariqah*.²⁵ The reason was that Hadramaut was regarded as the spiritual center, bound by the cult of saints that was symbolized by the sacred geography.

Although many adherents of the *Thariqah* took part in migration, the spiritual masters in Hadramaut rejected migration. They saw the *mahjar* as a place where people were engaged in materialistic activities and became corrupted along the way. Migration was seen in direct opposition to the doctrine of *zuhd*, which was central to the teachings of the order. Although life in Hadramaut was difficult and burdensome, it was still portrayed in an idealized way. This position was depicted in a poem by the judge of Sa'yun, Muhsin al-Sagaf:

Forget Java. By the wells you stay, for here is ease;
Contentment is wealth, in it well-being and peace.
The satisfied stay with their folk, to Java they don't aspire.
Ah the clean life, with neither meddling nor discord.
Oh people of now, what's the dimness of sight?
Your cares over money, the cause of enmity.
Oh shabby smelly spit, throw a cover over it!²⁶

Poetry was only one of many modes of expression employed by the masters to reject migration. A work of rhyming prose written by Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Mihdar entitled *Maqama Dham al-Dunya*, also rejected migration.²⁷ It is a fictional work, which takes the form of a journey of a Hadrami to the *mahjar*. Throughout the text, al-Mihdar portrayed the corrupt characteristics of the world outside Hadramaut. The story follows a man who leaves his famine-stricken homeland to look for a more comfortable life. He travels to India first where he meets a beautiful woman he falls in

²⁵ Ulrike Freitag, 'Hadramaut: a Religious Center for the Indian Ocean in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries?' *Studia Islamica*, (1999), p. 182.

²⁶ Muhsin bin Alawi al-Sagaf, quoted by Eng seng Ho, "Hadramis Abroad in Hadramaut: The Muwalladin", p. 134.

²⁷ Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Mihdar, *Maqama Dham al-Dunya*, quoted in Eng seng Ho, "Hadramis Abroad in Hadramaut: The Muwalladin", p. 135.



love with. The woman, however, wants a heavy price for her dowry and demands five treasures: shame, manliness, mind, ancestry and religion. The woman is the personification of the world, which the protagonist pursues. He follows her to Singapore, Java, Cairo and Istanbul to no avail. Finally, before losing the last treasure, religion, the protagonist realizes the cost and leaves her for his homeland. Al-Mihdar's work, was a critique of migration, which he saw as responsible for the annihilation of the five most precious treasures.

The celebrated Hadrami scholar-poet, Ali bin Muhammad al-Hasbyi also launched a critique against migration. In one of his sermon, delivered in 1906, al-Habsyi congratulated a returning migrant for his unchanged character. For al-Habsyi, this was a great blessing from God for only a small number of people returned from the *mahjar* while still maintaining their noble character.²⁸ Finally al-Habsyi concluded his sermon by thanking God for the opportunity to live in 'a sacred valley and to pray in the mosques prayed by numerous saints and *Qutbh*'.²⁹ In another sermon delivered on the subject of *zuhd*, al-Habsyi reminisced the 'good old days' when the Hadramis relied on their crops for their livelihood. He also noted that when the Hadramis began to emigrate, they were exposed to the monetary system and upon returning to Hadramaut, they imposed the 'shackle of price' to their homeland.³⁰ The two reasons why the Hadramis left the 'sacred valley' and settled in the 'lands of the infidels', in al-Habsyi's view were the absence of *zuhd* and the love for the world.³¹

The three texts written respectively by al-Sagaf, al-Mihdar and al-Habsyi indicate that Hadramaut was the only place regarded as the physical 'spiritual homeland' of the *Thariqah*. In addition, the relation of Hadramaut with the cult of saints and *zuhd* became the two foundational points that constitute the notion of homeland. The absence of a cult of saints in the *mahjar* and the opposition to the concept of *zuhd*,

²⁸ Ali bin Muhammad al-Habsyi, *Al-Mawa'idz al-Jaliyyah min al-Majalis al-'Aliyyah*, edited by Ali bin Abdulqadir al-Habsyi (Seiyun: Maktabah al-Ribat, 1989) p.48.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 117.

³¹ *ibid.*



therefore, became the reasons of the anti-migration attitude of the masters in Hadramaut.

The Migrants and the Homeland: Pre-Independence Period

The maintenance of strong spiritual connections between the hostland and the homeland existed despite the skepticism of the masters in Hadramaut. Hadramaut for many in the *mahjar* was still seen as the spiritual homeland. Those who lived in the hostland yearned to visit Hadramaut to receive spiritual benedictions from the scholars who lived and were buried there. The adherents of the *Thariqah* formed their spiritual identity by aligning themselves to the order while at the same time conceiving the physical 'spiritual homeland', Hadramaut, which they saw as the spatial manifestation of the order.

Three sources best encapsulate the enduring spiritual connection between the hostlands and Hadramaut. The first is a *rihlah* to Hadramaut by Abdallah Bakathir.³² Bakathir was born and raised in Kenya, East Africa, another popular *mahjar* for Hadramis, where he studied religious sciences while piously adhering to the *Thariqah*. Even before visiting Hadramaut, Bakathir regarded it as his spiritual homeland because it was the home of the spiritual masters. In 1897, he finally undertook the long-awaited journey to Hadramaut to visit both the living scholars and the deceased saints. By visiting Hadramaut, Bakathir renewed the connection between East Africa and Hadramaut while simultaneously affirming the essential position of Hadramaut as the spiritual homeland.

³² The *rihlah* of Bakathir entitled, *Rihlah al-Aswaq as-Sawiyyah ila Mawatin as-Sadah al-'Alawiyyah*, has been reproduced by Anne K. Bang, "Islamic Reform in East Africa, ca. 1870-1925: The Alawi Case", paper presented to the workshop "Reasserting Connections, Commonalities, and Cosmopolitanism: The Western Indian Ocean since 1800", Yale University, November 2000, <http://www.hf.uib.no/smi/ab/abcv.html>, accessed 12 April 2005.



Similar to Bakahtir, a Hadrami entrepreneur who was also a pious adherent of the *Thariqah* in Indonesia, Abubakar bin ‘Ali Shahabuddin, regarded Hadramaut as his spiritual homeland. Abubakar visited Hadramaut in 1926 and recorded his journey in a *rihlah*, entitled *Rihlah al-Asfar*.³³ His account of his visit to Hadramaut was filled with references to scholars and saints, locations of shrines and books studied under the scholars in Hadramaut. Abubakar carefully noted all the scholars he met and knowledge that was passed down to him, thereby constructing a chain of narration. He also recorded various benedictions received throughout his travel, such as from Alwi bin Ali al-Juneid, Abdullah bin Umar Asy-Syathiri and Abdul-Bari bin Syeikh al-Aydrus.³⁴ As a successful entrepreneur in the *mahjar*, Abubakar spent some of his wealth on charity for his homeland, specifically; refurbishing mosques, drilling wells, and recruiting teachers for public education. It was apparent that Abubakar regarded Hadramaut as his spiritual homeland, where he could renew his spiritual connection to the *Thariqah*. Abubakar remained as a dutiful adherent of the order who went to his spiritual homeland for pilgrimage. In addition, as a successful migrant, he utilized the wealth accumulated in the *mahjar* to benefit the ‘the land of the sacred’.

The last source is a poem, *Darkah ya Ahl al-Madinah* by a Hadrami scholar Muhammad bin Eidroos al-Habsyi (d.1918) who died in Surabaya, East Java.³⁵ The poem is a litany of Hadrami saints from whom Al-Habsyi requested intercessions. Throughout the poem, a number of towns in Hadramut are mentioned. Al-Habsyi praised the saints and scholars of Hadramaut while recollecting the sacred geography of the valley. Java, which was al-Habsyi’s place of residence, remained absent from the poem. Hence, al-Habsyi reinstated Hadramaut as the ideal spiritual homeland.

From the three sources, the strong spiritual connections between the followers of the *Thariqah* in the *mahjar* and Hadramaut is evident. Spiritual identity was formed in

³³ Sayyid Abubakar bin Ali bin Abubakar Shahabuddin, *Rihlatul Asfar: Sebuah Otobiografi*, translated by Ali Yahya (Published personally, 2000).

³⁴ *ibid*, pp. 123, 142-5.

³⁵ The poem has been reproduce and compiled into an anthology of mystical Hadrami poetry, *Gurar wa Durar*, printed in Pekalongan, 1997.



relation to the order and to Hadramaut. There was no attempt, in the colonial period, of conceptualizing an autochthonous spiritual identity by shifting the ethereal homeland to the hostland. In the case of Indonesia, this phenomenon can be explained in terms of the socio-political condition of the early twentieth century. Within the Hadrami community at large, there was an increased belief in the notion that identity was bound up with one's land of origin.³⁶ This came as a result of a number of factors. The rise of a homeland-centered nationalism among the Chinese in the Indies persuaded the Hadramis to follow suit. Also, the rise of Indonesian nationalist movements, rejected foreigners and attempted to exclude the Hadramis from their national imagination.³⁷ In addition, Dutch colonial government pursued a policy of parochializing the Arabs for fear of Pan-Islamic influences, thereby detaching them from the indigenous Indonesians.³⁸ These factors contributed to the rise of a homeland-centered nationalism among the Hadrami community at large. Subsequently, the development in the secular sphere affected, in an ambiguous manner, the formation of a 'distant' spiritual identity among the adherents of the *Thariqah*.³⁹ It is because we have examined the narrative of migration among the adherents of the *Thariqah* that we can now re-read the *rihlah* that this paper began with.

The Migrants and The Homeland: Post-Independence Period

The *rihlah* of Alawi was written in 1952, seven years after the independence of Indonesia. The *rihlah* projected different notion of 'spiritual homeland'. Pilgrimages did not take place in Hadramaut anymore but in Java. In this sense, there was an attempt to cloak Java with spiritual values and infuse it with metaphysical elements

³⁶ Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening*, p. 50.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Hamid Algadri, *Politik Belanda Terhadap Islam dan Keturunan Arab di Indonesia* (Jakarta, CV Haji Masagung, 1988) pp. 95-105.

³⁹ For a discussion on the interconnectedness between socio-political context in the hostland and the construction of a diasporic identity, see: William Safran, "Deconstructing and Comparing Diasporas" in Waltraud Kokot, Khaching Tololyan & Carolin Alfonso (Eds), *Diaspora, Identity and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp.18-9.



connected to the *Thariqah*. Java, was imagined as another physical manifestation of the *Thariqah*, thereby constructing a more autochthonous spiritual homeland.

The *rihlah* conceptualizes Java as another physical ‘spiritual homeland’ for the adherents of the *Thariqah*. It began with a dictation of a poem affirming the intention of the journey. Alawi asserted that the intention was to visit the *Qutbh* to receive his benediction.⁴⁰ In the poem, he mentioned two Javanese cities, Gersik and Jombang, in which two saints lived.⁴¹ In another poem, Alawi mentioned another city, Pasuruan, where an additional saint lived.⁴² The significance of these cities was the connection with the saints, who resided or were buried there. This was a departure from earlier literature, in which the cities mentioned were in Java rather than Hadramaut.

Alawi visited numerous cities in East Java, where he met living Hadrami scholars and was engaged in forums with them. In such forums, the importance of the *Thariqah* was continually affirmed. The forums were a type of *rauhah* (religious forum that followed Hadrami convention) in which poems were recited, canonical *Thariqah* literature was read and supplications unique to the order were read aloud. In the past, these activities were reserved for Hadramaut alone and yet they now took place in Java. In other words, the activities that once made Hadramaut as the ideal manifestation of the *Thariqah* were re-enacted in Java. This compelled a person who participated in the forums to say that the ventures reminded him of the activities in Hadramaut.⁴³ The *rihlah*, therefore, indicated the spiritualization of Java, by the re-enactment of devotional activities.

Another important factor was Alawi’s *ziyara* to a number of shrines in East Java. Shrines as we have noted, played a key role in the construction of sacred geography in Hadramaut. In the journey, Alawi visited the shrines of the *Thariqah*’s saints in

⁴⁰ Abdulkadir Assegaf, *Layali al-qadri*, p. 10.

⁴¹ Abubakar bin Muhammad Assegaf (d. 1956) lived in Gersik, while Husein bin Muhammad al-Haddad (d. 1956) lived in Jombang. Both are eminent saints in the tradition of the *Thariqah*.

⁴² Abdulkadir Assegaf, *Layali al-Qadri*, p. 73. The saint who lived in Pasuruan was Ja’far bin Syaikh al-Assegaf (d. 1954), was also regarded as illustrious saint in the *Thariqah*.

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 110.



different locations. The visitations could be seen as a solidification of the strong connection between the order and the land. The physical symbols of the *Thariqah* ceased to be the monopoly of Hadramaut, but also became the privilege of Java. In other words, Java became another natural homeland for the order. In addition, by meticulously describing the places and the actual occasion of the *ziyara*, the *rihlah* facilitated the imagining of a spiritual boundary. The *rihlah* constructed a spiritual map of Java that asserted the sacred geography of the land through its attachment with the order. Therefore, the formerly spiritual barren land of Java was spiritualized by the *rihlah*. The metaphor in the end of the text encapsulated this idea: 'Flood fills the barren land'.⁴⁴

The final point is the absence of any form of mercantile activity in the *rihlah*. Java was predominantly known to the Hadramis as a center of capitalism. This perception provoked the masters in Hadramaut to adopt a critical stance towards migration. Hadramaut was seen as the land of the sacred for its ideal religious and ascetic lifestyle, while the *mahjar* was perceived as the land of the damned for its corrupt and materialistic tendencies. From this perspective, the *rihlah* had written back to the masters in Hadramaut, refuting the claim that Java was the land of the damned. A fundamental message that the *rihlah* offered was that life in Java was not necessarily limited to constant rotation around trade and worldly endeavors. By portraying the spiritual activities of the adherents of the *Thariqah* in the *mahjar*, the *rihlah* refuted the criticism of the masters by presenting Java as another sacred land.

The sacralization of Java had an impact on the construction of identity among the adherents of the *Thariqah*. By maintaining the connection between the order and the land, the *rihlah* was repositioning the notion of 'spiritual homeland' from Hadramaut to Java. While not diminishing the value of Hadramaut, the *rihlah* gave an option for its readers in conceptualizing homeland. For the adherents of the *Thariqah*, identity still rested on the order itself. Yet the physical manifestation of the *Thariqah* was no

⁴⁴ Abdulkadir Assegaf, *Layali al-qadri*, p. 110. (The quotation is my own translation).



longer the monopoly of Hadramaut. The allegiance to the physical ‘spiritual homeland’ for followers of the *Thariqah* could now be linked to Java as well as Hadramaut.

The *rihlah*, therefore, served two purposes. First, it formed a collective imagination of Java as another spiritual homeland for the adherents of the *Thariqah* who lived in Java. The *rihlah* was read individually by members of the *Thariqah* as well as read aloud collectively in various gatherings of the order. It was through this process that adherents of the order collectively began to imagine Java as another spiritual homeland of the *Thariqah*. Secondly, as noted before, the *rihlah* challenged the skepticism of the masters in Hadramaut on the issue of migration by showing that life in the *mahjar* can still be in accordance to the teachings of the order. Specifically, it shows how *zuhd*, visitation to the shrines of the saints, as well as intellectual and religious gatherings could still be practiced in Java. Both purposes of the *rihlah* were channeled to the members of the order by releasing the text into the *sphere of the Thariqah*, where it could be accessed. This distinct sphere, as oppose to the public sphere, was maintained by networks of scholars, dissemination of the text as well as religious and intellectual forums practiced by the adherents of the *Thariqah*.

Why did the autochthonous formation of spiritual homeland came as late as 1952? The answer can be located in the socio-political world into which the *rihlah* was projected. The 1950s was the pinnacle period of the fervent nationalist sentiments in a newly independent country like Indonesia. The new nation was trying to develop a unifying ideology and consequently, it addressed any form of separate identity with suspicion.⁴⁵ In addition, since independence, the relationship between the Hadrami community at large and the indigenous Indonesians had progressed towards a more assimilationist position. The Hadrami community had also released themselves from their cultural upbringing.⁴⁶ This position was required to be accepted as citizen of the newly

⁴⁵ Ulrike Freitag, “Conclusion: The Diaspora Since the Age of Independence” in Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence-Smith (Eds), *Hadrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean*, p. 316.

⁴⁶ Hamid Algadri, *Politik Belanda Terhadap Islam dan Keturunan Arab di Indonesia*, p. 137.



independent country. For this reason, the Hadrami community formed a political party, Indonesian-Arab Party (PAI) even before the independence. The party favored Indonesia as the homeland of the Arabs, while acknowledging Hadramaut as the land of the ancestors.⁴⁷ To a certain extent, therefore, the *rihlah* was influenced by its socio-political context and it served as corroboration to the challenge of Indonesia nationalism on the spiritual level.

Conclusion

The anthropologist Talal Asad writes that the modern public sphere has, contrary to the idealization of Habermas, always been a space of social exclusions.⁴⁸ That is, those who were invited to participate in the public sphere were those who conform to certain liberal habits of knowledge and practice, in other words, those who were familiar to Western ideas and practices. The debate on the construction of identity and the conceptualization of homeland among the Hadramis in Indonesia has been an extensive one. Not much, however, focuses exclusively on the adherents of the *Thariqah*. This article suggests that a reason for this is the absence of their voices from the ‘reliable’ historical sources. It is apparent that the adherents of the *Thariqah*, many of whom, were not exposed to liberal habits of knowledge and practices were excluded from the public sphere. They expressed themselves differently, sometimes in a very subtle and intricate manner. For this reason, in order to recover their ‘hidden’ voice, one could look at the spiritual texts written in the tradition of the order. As this paper has shown, there was a changing perception on migration and the notion of

⁴⁷ Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening*, p. 137.

See also Sumit K. Mandal, “Forging a Modern Arab Identity in Java in the Early Twentieth Century” in Huub De Jonge & Nico Kaptein (Eds), *Transcending Borders: Arab, Politics, Trade and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) pp. 181-201.



homeland that took place over a period of time. This can be recovered from the inter-textual dialogues and communications that took place between Hadramaut and Indonesia within *the sphere of the Thariqah*.

The construction of identity among the adherents of the *Thariqah Alawiyyah* was spiritual in nature but with a corresponding notion of physical homeland. Prior to the independence of Indonesia, the ideal homeland of the adherents was Hadramaut. The homeland was seen as the land of the sacred while the *mahjar* was perceived as the land of the damned. After independence, the position shifted. As the *rihlah* has indicated, the *mahjar* was imagined in a spiritual way and the land was installed with spiritual significances. The result was the construction of another physical 'spiritual homeland' in Java. The re-imagination of Java was connected to the political context at the time. Nationalist movements compelled the Hadramis to construct their identity as Indonesian, showing that there was a connection between socio-political issues and spiritual affairs. The adherents of the *Thariqah* had participated in the debate about identity. Rather than constructing political identity, they constructed its spiritual counterpart so that both identities could support one another.

This paper merely shows an example of how there are still many critical potentials yet to be explored in traditional Hadrami literatures. Many other research methods can be devised in order to comprehend spiritual literature. By utilizing spiritual literature, we are able to understand the perceptions of the mystically oriented Hadramis and see how they communicate with each other and their immediate context. One of the aim of this paper is to stimulate the production of other critical project that read and writes 'against the grain' of the history of the Hadramis abroad. The interpretation that this paper offers is by no means final. What it seeks is to enable the opening up of possibilities for further critical readings.

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